

Consensus

Volume 21

Issue 1 *Women and Men in Theological Education:
Exploring the Present, Creating the Future*

Article 6

5-1-1995

Response to Donna Runnalls

David MacLachlan

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

MacLachlan, David (1995) "Response to Donna Runnalls," *Consensus*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol21/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Response to Donna Runnalls

David MacLachlan

*Associate Professor of Biblical Studies,
Atlantic School of Theology, Halifax*

Professor Runnalls' paper raises more questions than it gives answers. Considering the present situation with respect to women and men in theological education and in the church's ministry, this may not be entirely inappropriate. Courage to pose and face hard questions is often the first step in moving forward into a new and more just reality. We need assurance, however, that we have posed the right or most helpful questions to animate that forward movement. I believe that authentic questions have been raised in this paper, especially concerning the nature of institutions, and I would respond by simply adding some of my own.

1. Professor Runnalls has provided statistics about the enrolment of women in religious/theological programs in ATS-related schools. While the questions she raises related to these statistics are important ones, I would add a block of questions concerning the connection between academic programs in theology and the churches' involvement in those programs and expectations of students who enrol in those programs. If a particular church is not open to including women among its clergy, or more generally in its leadership in a equal way either as lay people or clergy, this would certainly affect the choice a woman would make at the academic level. She would be faced with possible anti-female bias in any field-based work for an M.Div. program, for instance, or vocational restrictions once the M.Div. is completed. Might she not prefer to take an MTS or special MA which would give essentially the same theological training but without the need to suffer the institutional bias against female leadership? I simply raise the wider context of theological education which is formed by the ecclesial

institutions as a crucial area of inquiry before all the pieces to the puzzle are placed on the table. And this issue may be even more acute for gay and lesbian candidates.

At the same time, our academic and church institutions need also to address the issues connected to the growing number of professional "non-candidates" who are seeking to work in the same field. How are they prepared and what will their roles be in our churches and related institutions? The theological question this raises for me is: How do/will our schools and churches make place for the variety of gifts inspired by the Spirit in both men and women?

2. Professor Runnalls raises the question of "a sustainable long-term change" in the inclusion of women in theological education. But "a sustainable long-term change" in the inclusion of women as students in theological education will be linked, as far as I can see, to the number of women on a given faculty. In our experience at the Atlantic School of Theology, it has been seen to be important that women students have women faculty to relate to, at least when needed. Even if they do not experience a crisis in which they need special counsel or support from a female faculty member, the presence of women faculty lends a "credible" character to the institution as a place of learning for women. This kind of support and collegiality is a necessary factor and needs to be strengthened for long-term and positive change (hopefully without the "guruism" or *prima dona* syndrome which can infect both students and faculty alike!).

This will not take place, however, without positive male faculty attitudes and support; and this may be as important as anything the women faculty may say or do. We have found at our school that significant numbers of women find study with us to be a liberating experience because they discover—often for the first time—that the faculty, both male and female, along with other students, take them seriously and expect them to take themselves and their own views equally seriously.

3. With regard to Professor Runnalls' statistics about parity and job satisfaction, it should be noted here that at the Atlantic School of Theology we have moved to salary parity within the same rank of faculty. (There are four ranks from lecturer to full professor.) Though the percentage of female faculty remains at slightly under 25% (4 of 13), however, the current student body is about 57% female, 43% male.

At AST we are also affected by the character of our denominational context. The three founding parties of the school are the Anglican, Roman Catholic, and United Churches. The school's existence and work commits each partner, to some degree, to the other partners' issues and "solutions". A situation which illustrates this is the lawsuit which AST has experienced over the past year. One student named the school, his denominational program director, and another female student as defendants in his claim of defamation of character and loss of income and opportunity in his chosen career of ordained ministry. Whatever the particulars of the case, I note two things: i) of the three defendants, the female student has probably suffered the most in terms of personal and financial difficulties (her considerable legal costs are not covered by any insurance we know of, nor by any action to date by her church or the school); ii) educational institutions will have to consider seriously the implications of legal action and its effects upon the relationship of men and women in an academic or church community.

4. If a theological institution intends to move closer to a "communitas" existence, as Professor Runnalls describes it, the paradigms needed to sustain its life and growth will need, at least in part, to come from scripture. The "problem of the Bible" and of normative Christian tradition for feminist thinking will need much further discussion. A sustainable "root paradigm" for new community life and study will need, at least in part, to be grounded in the biblical witness if that paradigm is to live and be recognized by our church communities as a viable alternative to long-held assumptions about education and theology. Perhaps it is a matter of "catching our churches with their own gospel"!

An example of how a biblical paradigm can provide direction and energy appears in the Revelation to John. Through chapters 1-20, an hierarchical relationship characterizes God's presence among the nations (chapters 5, 7, etc.). But in the new heaven and new earth, the vertical structure is replaced by a horizontal one in which God and the Lamb live among the peoples, not over and above them. This direction for the whole of creation is an eschatological affirmation of equality and justice among peoples even within the old structures.

5. Further to a discussion of root paradigms, the present dominant paradigm which, in my opinion, plays a vital role in

determining relationships in the sphere of education, is the economic one of budget-setting, trimming, or balancing. Budget-trimming can only be dealt with fairly if equity exists previous to any budgetary adjustments. In the name of deficits and shrinking dollars, positions and advancements can be reduced or eliminated almost without recourse. The power and homage paid to the idol of the deficit in our own time would rival the worshippers' devotion given to a deity in any previous age! It should be noted, however, that, as the Revelation shows by the parable of the city of Babylon and its traders (chapt. 18), judgement falls not only on the idol or the Beast but also on its followers, because of their worship and actions as obeisance to the false god.

(On the way to this consultation I listened to a radio program about the depression in Canada in the 1930s. Attention was drawn to a work by Professor Margaret Conrad of Acadia University in which she examined and compared the effects of the depression suffered by women to those experienced by men. Women often bore the brunt of economic deprivation for the entire family, in ways in which men did not. I suggest that a comparison of this experience from the 1930s with what we are experiencing today in institutional budget-setting might well be a fruitful exercise!)

6. I want to close my reflections on Professor Runnalls' paper by mentioning two aspects of theological education which will need to be reckoned with if the role and influence of women is to continue. In my own field of biblical studies, no scholar can do credible work without including at least one piece of research by a female scholar in a given area. To ignore this would place an instructor in the embarrassing position of being instructed by the students who can show more awareness of scholarly contributions than the professor.

This is linked to the presence of women in the various fields of theological discourse, but also to the awareness and courage (the "moral energy of the members", Runnalls) of the men who form the majority of the theological scholarly community. Whether or not the advances made in the last 20-30 years (which at least have made it clear that women are just as capable of "wisdom" and "reasoning" as men) will persist into the next century may simply hinge on the ability of Christian institutions and communities to ignore so many examples in

their midst. Such ignorance will be a remarkable feat if carried out, since we have now "a great crowd" of Hildegards in theology which can raise a voice not easily silenced or depreciated.

But precisely here I mention my second point; namely, that the forces of traditionalism and patriarchy can and will still astound us. We may not see the kinds of progress we want to see very quickly or perhaps at all. In the light of the opposition to the effective inclusion of female experience and scholarship in our theological and church institutions, we will need to develop just as effective strategies which allow us to keep on with the struggle even when the cause may well appear to be lost! Again, the Revelation to John has much to say on this topic. I am still unnerved when I consider that Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* scared me more than anything I have read by Stephen King. The horror of Atwood's tale lies, for me, in the force and vitality of the conventional realities and attitudes she portrays as the dominant authority, attitudes which are very present with us now. I repeat, too, that, as far as I can see, the success of any reforms for inclusion will have to be accompanied by the inclusive theologies of men already "in the system" in order to keep our institutions "awake" to the inclusiveness of all peoples and their gifts and, therefore, "alive" and "well".